

*Teachers' Guide*

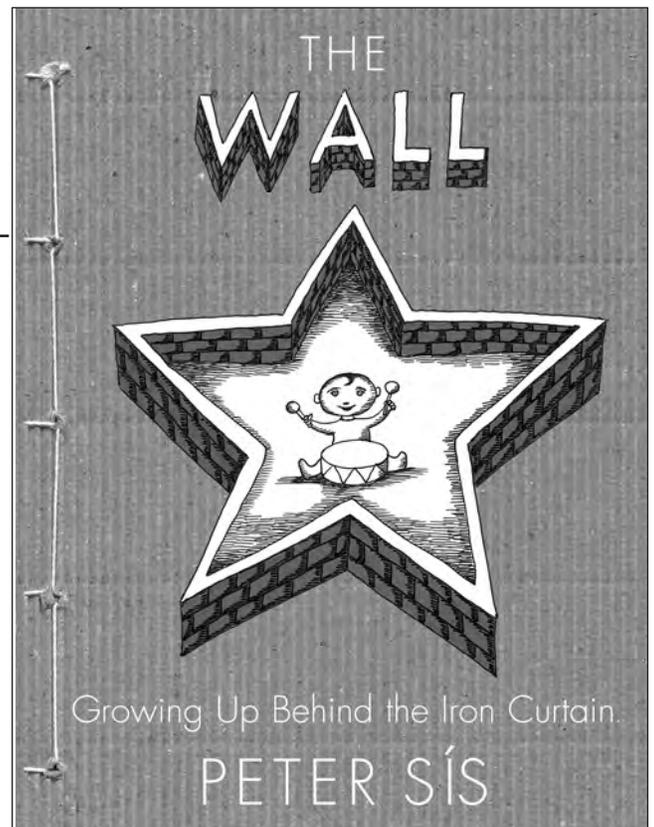
# The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain

by Peter Sís

## Introduction

In *The Wall*, one man's personal history reveals a larger story: the history of a country, the vagaries of culture, the power of world politics, and the universal human longing for personal freedom. Through the narrative, the journal entries, and the captions, and by examining and re-examining the pictures, readers see the second half of the twentieth century from Peter Sís's perspective as a young boy, an artist, growing up during the Cold War in Communist Czechoslovakia.

Every page of *The Wall* offers many discoveries. Some will raise questions that become the start of students' research, some will introduce ideas that lead to discussions, and some will fill in missing pieces in students'



own knowledge of the time or of a particular subject. This guide is meant to help educators take advantage of the teaching and learning

opportunities the book presents in the subjects of history, politics, geography, language arts, and art.

**Some background:** The Cold War was an outgrowth of the victory by the Allied forces and the Soviet Union over Nazi Germany that ended World War II in 1945. Germany was partitioned into sectors, with the United States, the United Kingdom, and France holding administrative control over western Germany and the Soviet Union in control of the east. In addition, Berlin, the capital of Germany, was partitioned into four occupation zones. The three zones under control by the Allies came to be known as West Berlin, and the zone controlled by the Soviet Union as East Berlin. When the German national government was restored in May 1949 as the Federal Republic of Germany (commonly known as West Germany), it included the occupation zones of the United States, the United Kingdom, and France. In response, in October 1949, the Soviets sponsored the foundation of a German Communist country in the eastern zone: the German Democratic Republic (known as East Germany).

Both West and East Germany were declared sovereign in 1955. Allied troops remained in the west, and Soviet troops in the east. As a result, the Soviets were in a position to exert influence over all of the countries in eastern Europe. Soon, much of eastern Europe came under Soviet domination. Although the border between West and East Germany was largely closed, many East Germans managed to flee to the West, especially over borders in Berlin. In 1961, the construction of the Berlin Wall physically enclosed West Berlin and effectively cut off East Germany. The Cold War lasted for over forty years, until the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, and the Soviet Union collapsed shortly thereafter.

(The Introduction to *The Wall* provides a concise summary of the history behind the story and an explanation of the terms “Iron Curtain” and “Cold War.”)

## Preliminary Activities

### Social Studies / History / Map Study

Even before your class reads *The Wall*, the students can become familiar with the world Peter Sís grew up in by studying historical maps of Europe.

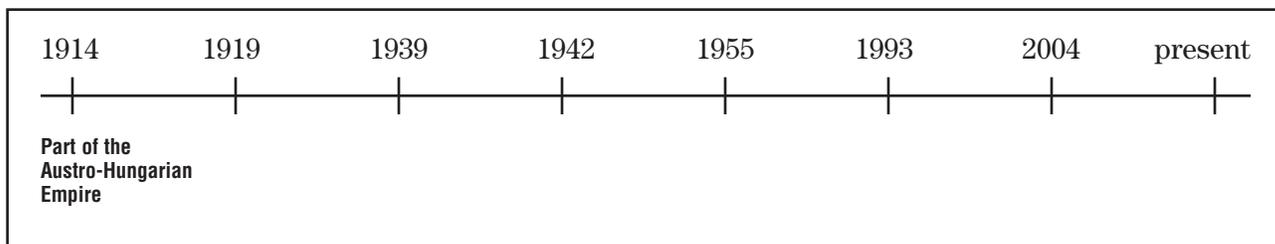
The political map of Europe changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. While existing countries vied for territory, ethnic groups sought to form their own nations. This struggle, which has gone on for centuries, continues today. Look at Europe from the beginning of the twentieth century to the present.

On the next page is a list of Web sites your students can access that show the changes in the European landscape from before World War I through World War II, the Cold War, and into the present. The sites include maps of Czechoslovakia then and now. Your students should notice that Czechoslovakia was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and didn't exist as a sovereign nation until after World War I; today it is two separate countries, the Czech Republic and Slovakia.

To begin, have your students look at the map of Europe in 1914 before the start of World War I. Questions to discuss can include but are not limited to:

- Which countries were the dominant forces on the European mainland?
- Which contemporary nations are missing?

With the defeat of Germany in 1919, the map of Europe was redrawn when the Treaty of Versailles was signed by the United States, France, and Great Britain. Your students should examine the map of Europe in 1919. Have them list the countries in central and eastern Europe that were created at that time. Then have them look at the maps from 1939, 1942, post-World



War II, post-Cold War, and 2004, and track the political history of those countries. Have them discuss the changes.

At the top is a timeline for Czechoslovakia. Using the maps as reference, have your students fill in Czechoslovakia's political designation underneath each date. The first one is already entered.

### Maps of Europe

#### **1914**

[www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/maps/europe1914.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/maps/europe1914.htm)

#### **1919**

[www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/maps/europe1919.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/maps/europe1919.htm)

#### **1939**

[www2.wnorton.com/college/history/ralph/resource/wwii.htm](http://www2.wnorton.com/college/history/ralph/resource/wwii.htm)

#### **1942**

[www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/occmmap.html](http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/Holocaust/occmmap.html)

#### **Post-World War II**

[www.dushkin.com/connectext/wpold/ch2/map3bar.mhtml](http://www.dushkin.com/connectext/wpold/ch2/map3bar.mhtml)

#### **2004**

[www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/europe/europe\\_pol\\_2004.jpg](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/europe/europe_pol_2004.jpg)

#### **2007**

[www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/europe/europe\\_ref\\_2007.pdf](http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/europe/europe_ref_2007.pdf)

#### **Czechoslovakia, 1985**

[www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pv/maps/Czechoslovakia.jpg](http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/~pv/maps/Czechoslovakia.jpg)

#### **The Czech Republic today**

[www.upce.cz/english/english-university/en-where/map-cz/univ-cr-en.html](http://www.upce.cz/english/english-university/en-where/map-cz/univ-cr-en.html)

#### **Slovakia today**

[www.ieq.org/slovakia.html](http://www.ieq.org/slovakia.html)

### Art / Book Art

As a reading experience for students in upper elementary, middle, and high school, the combination of words and pictures in *The Wall* will be especially satisfying. In many ways *The Wall* is like a graphic novel, a literary form popular with young readers. Sís fills each spread with images that invite readers to take in not only the meanings of the words but their emotional impact as well. The illustrations provide context. For example, we learn in the first few spreads that while life in Czechoslovakia was becoming more and more constricted, one little boy was growing up in a loving family. He smiles at us as he learns to express himself in drawings. We see him accommodate the demands of society but also develop a strong spirit and sense of himself.

Ask your students to examine the text and pictures on the first few pages of the book to see how Sís presents not only the realities of life but also the way he, as a child, responded to those realities. Ask them how the author shows his emotional state of being and how that changes when he discovers that “there

were things he wasn't told." Discuss the use of the color red in the book's early pages and throughout.

## Language Arts Activities

### Words and Terms—Glossary

At right are over twenty-five names and terms that are important to understanding *The Wall*. Have your students define each term and create a glossary for *The Wall*. Many of the terms can be discerned from their context in the story. Your students will have to research the meanings of those words and phrases that are more complex. They should add any new terms they think should be included.

After the glossaries are compiled and your students have studied the words and phrases, conduct a Glossary Bee. Write each term on one side of an index card and its meaning on the reverse. Pair your students into teams of two. When it's a team's turn, draw a card and ask the partners to define the term. They can discuss the meaning before giving their answer. If they answer correctly, they go on to the next round. If not, they get a second chance with another term. Teams that answer correctly on their first try carry over their second chance to another round. Terms answered incorrectly should be placed back into the pool of cards rather than passed on to the next team. The last team standing wins.

## Oral History Project

Sís writes that in 1968, when a new government took over in Prague, "everything seemed possible." Peter was a young adult then, and his vision of Western culture was taking shape. Even later, when the Soviets invaded, Peter held on to his dream of being a part of that world. Students should look closely at the

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Alexander Dubček  
 Austro-Hungarian Empire  
 Berlin Wall  
 brainwashing  
 capitalism  
 censorship  
 Cold War  
 communism  
 compulsory  
 Czech People's Militia  
 dissident  
 Eastern Bloc  
 glasnost  
 Iron Curtain  
 Mikhail Gorbachev  
 Nazi Germany  
 October Revolution  
 perestroika  
 Prague Spring  
 samizdat  
 socialism  
 Socialist Realism  
 Soviet Union  
 subversives  
 village cooperative  
 Western Bloc  
 Young Pioneers of Czechoslovakia

details in the pictures that depict this period: the Beatles, the Beach Boys, Allen Ginsberg, poetry, film, theater, and art. This view of life in the late sixties in the West is idealized.

Have your students investigate what life was like for young people living in the West in 1968. Create an oral history project. Help the class identify people in the community whom they can interview: aunts, uncles, teachers, and neighbors who were in their late teens in 1968. Guide the class in developing an interview questionnaire for these oral histories.

Questions can include but are not limited to:

- How old were you in 1968?
- What major events of that time do you recall?
- Were you aware of the Cold War, and, if so, how did it affect you?
- Who were the important people during that period—in government, music, film, literature?
- What was the major issue in your life at that time?
- What were you and your peers rebelling against?
- What else would you like to add about that time?

Students will discover that it wasn't all rock 'n' roll and psychedelic art. The war in Vietnam was raging; civil rights and women's rights were at issue. Leaders Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. This was not the ideal world the young Peter Sís was imagining.

After the students share the results of their interviews and their conclusions about life in the West in 1968, have them discuss the differences between life in the West and Sís's life in Czechoslovakia at that time.

Students in the upper grades who have learned to make multimedia slide show presentations can use the responses they've gathered to the questionnaires to create a documentary in the

manner of Ken Burns. The visuals should be images they find of the 1960s, while the audio should be scripted voice-overs of the individual questionnaire responses.

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## Art Activities

### Art and Style

*The Wall* chronicles the development of the artist Peter Sís from his childhood in Czechoslovakia to his departure for the West. Guide your students to understand more about the artist's methods, media, and styles. Discuss with the class the various techniques Sís uses. Questions to consider are:

- How does his use of color, line, and shading set the different moods and feelings of the book?
- How does he use shape and design?
- How does he portray images of authority?

Have the class look at other books by Peter Sís, such as *Starry Messenger: Galileo Galilei*, *Tibet Through the Red Box*, and *Madlenka*, to see how Sís uses composition to convey his ideas. As an activity, have the students write story lines of their own lives. Then have each student create an illustrated double-page spread with the text running along the bottom and additional illustrations and text around the borders, just as Sís does.

### Music and Performing Arts

While local underground rock music was popular with young adults in Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s, it was American and British rock bands they were enamored of. Sís tells us: "Bits and pieces of news from the West [began] to slip through the Iron Curtain"—news about the Beatles, Elvis, and the Rolling Stones. On June 17, 1969, the American rock group the Beach Boys gave a concert in Prague.

Peter Sís was an ardent rock 'n' roll enthusiast. He was an emcee and a D.J. with his own radio show. Besides playing music of Czech bands, he played music of the American and British bands that were popular at that time.

Have your students imagine themselves in 1969 and create music playlists that Sís might have used on his radio program. They should each choose twenty-five bands that were on the music scene then and make a playlist with one song from each band. They might even be able to burn CDs of their selections and perform them as D.J.s.

Some Web sites that may be useful are:

[www.scopecreep.com/yahoo/2006/06/19/the-best-of-1969/#more-857](http://www.scopecreep.com/yahoo/2006/06/19/the-best-of-1969/#more-857)

[www.kink.fm/pages/131363.php?contentType=4&contentId=246654](http://www.kink.fm/pages/131363.php?contentType=4&contentId=246654)

[www.ahs72.org/music.htm](http://www.ahs72.org/music.htm)

[www.scaruffi.com/history/cpt27.html](http://www.scaruffi.com/history/cpt27.html)

## Social Studies Activities

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### History

In January 1968, Alexander Dubček, the new head of the Communist Party, installed reforms to liberalize the government. Sís writes, "Slowly our world [began] to open up. Censorship [was] lifted . . . It was the Prague Spring of 1968!" The expression "Prague Spring" has special meaning to Sís and the Czech people. Unfortunately, it was a short season. In August of that year it came to an abrupt end. Have your students read texts about the Prague Spring and the Soviet invasion that followed.

These Web sites will help:

<http://prague-life.com/prague/prague-spring>

<http://library.thinkquest.org/C001155/index1.htm>

[http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/21/newsid\\_2781000/2781867.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/onthisday/hi/dates/stories/august/21/newsid_2781000/2781867.stm)

[www.rferl.org/specials/invasion1968](http://www.rferl.org/specials/invasion1968)

[http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/publications/DOC\\_readers/psread/doc81.htm](http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/nsa/publications/DOC_readers/psread/doc81.htm)

Once your students have some insight into what the Prague Spring meant to the Czech people, have them write newspaper articles about the newfound freedoms enjoyed during this period—the lack of censorship, the political inclusion, culture, travel, and fashion—or about the Soviet invasion and the loss of what had been gained.

### Living History

The subtitle of *The Wall* is *Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*. It is difficult for anyone who is not from a former Eastern Bloc country to fully understand what that means.

In order for your students to gain some idea of the oppressiveness of life behind the Iron Curtain, you can simulate that experience in class by creating a divided society. Break the class into two groups. Construct a barrier of desks across the room, separating the front of the room from the back. Explain to your students that the group behind the desks is to be living behind the Iron Curtain just as Sís did in his youth. They will follow strict regulations. For example, they will be told which books they can read, what clothing they may wear, in what manner they may style their hair, what they will learn, and the type of art they may create. Even at home and in their free time, there will be restrictions. Some television shows, music, movies, Web sites, and video games will be prohibited.

The group in front of the barrier lives in freedom. They will be allowed to choose their own reading material, dress and wear their hair according to their tastes and individual styles,

discuss the topics they will study, and have the right to free expression in their art.

After a few days, have the students switch places and repeat the experiment. Discuss the experience with them. Questions to consider are: How did they feel about being confined behind the desks? Did the group living in freedom have any compassion for the confined group? How did the actual experience differ from what they imagined it would be? Are these kinds of restrictions on personal freedom ever okay? Under what circumstances might they be? Are having parental guidance rules on movies and television programming the same as these kinds of restrictions? Why or why not? Then have the students write compositions about the experience.

**Note:** This activity should be cleared through your school administration, and letters should be sent home to parents to explain the nature of the activity.

### **Intellectual Freedom / First Amendment Rights**

A common thread in all oppressive societies is that the free flow of ideas and information is prohibited. Books and films are banned. Art and culture are censored. Access to the Internet is limited or denied, or spyware is implemented. Phone taps and electronic surveillance are utilized.

Infractions against civil liberties can happen in free societies like ours. Take, for example, the banning and challenging of books. Many times, books for children and young adults are challenged and taken off public and school library shelves because someone finds elements in the book which they think minors shouldn't be exposed to.

Read *The Wall* as a class and hypothesize as to why it might be challenged.

Hold a mock trial in which the book itself is the defendant. Select a student to play the book and another to be the defense attorney. Select a student to be the plaintiff—the challenger—and another to be the attorney for the plaintiff. You will also need a judge, jury, bailiff, court reporter, and witnesses. Every member of the class should have a role.

In planning this trial, students should recognize the importance of a justice system that gives due process to all. In Czechoslovakia, under Communist rule, this did not exist for all citizens. After the decision is rendered, discuss the process.

For more information about intellectual freedom issues pertaining to young people, download “Kids, Know Your Rights! A Young Person’s Guide to Intellectual Freedom” at [www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscpubs/KidsKnowYourRights.pdf](http://www.ala.org/ala/alsc/alscpubs/KidsKnowYourRights.pdf).

## About the author

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Peter Sís is an internationally acclaimed illustrator, author, and filmmaker who was awarded a MacArthur Fellowship. He was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, and attended the Academy of Applied Arts in Prague and the Royal College of Art in London. He began his career as a filmmaker, and his film work is in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Photo © Palma Fiacco Fotografien

Peter has more than twenty books to his credit and almost as many distinctions, including the Caldecott Honor Medal for both *Starry Messenger: Galileo Galilei* and *Tibet Through the Red Box*. He lives in the New York City

area with his wife, Terry Lajtha, a documentary filmmaker, and their two children, Madeleine and Matej.

### For more information on Peter Sís:

#### *Web sites:*

*www.fsgkidsbooks.com*

Includes a biography of the author and additional information about his books as well as other Teachers' Guides.

*www.petersis.com*

Contains more information about the author and his books as well as personal photos, interviews, and other projects.

*www.bookexpocast.com/authors-studio/2007/07/02/the-wall-by-peter-sis*

A podcast interview with the author about *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*.

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## *The Wall: Growing Up Behind the Iron Curtain*

by Peter Sís

Full-color pictures by the author

Map, Introduction, Afterword

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